

# **English Kills**

**Monica Wendel**

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**7 x 7**

## Little Pond Farm, Florida

I hadn't expected the land to fight so hard against the farm—at sunset we slept, and by sunrise the bugs were eating the kale, rain had split the tomatoes, deer graced their long necks over the electric fence to part their mouths around corn.

In the stink of it, the heat, Sarah humming some long-forgotten pop song, fire ants crawled up my leg as I knelt in hot sandy soil, planting roots of ginger two knuckles deep. The ants raised blisters on my thighs. A little piece of heaven, she said the farm was, and divorced her husband for it. I knew her husband before I knew her—bearded, big-laughed—together we climbed into dumpsters to rescued battered apples bound for landfill. What does it take, to nourish love. Or a child, like the one he wanted and she didn't. Is a fetus a creature that fights the blood that feeds it until it emerges from one body into its own? Like the thunderstorm that had uprooted the spotted beans, their dried-out stalks heavy with seed pods we would break open, the soil beneath them charged with the nitrogen the roots had fixed. Even the tomatoes reminded me of women, their skin split, pink flesh emerging, scarred—

## Back Home—

One of my students disappears underground into the subway, carrying her mother's purse, wearing cream-colored high heels. She reminds me of Sarah—the black hair, a wildness that's hard to explain but exists as solidly as a granite stone flecked with mica, flashes of light and black. In one picture, hanging in the Laundromat, she's posing for fifth-grade graduation. In another, she's grainy, her body a newspaper comic, one hand closing the door of her apartment building, caught by security camera. In this city, rivers open their mouths, swallowing each other, joining, and the harbor says to the rivers, come here, and the ocean to the harbor says, come here, and the moon pulls all of the water on earth with it without saying anything, just doing, moving its silent way across the sky which is turning from purple-brown to light blue in morning. Meanwhile her brother moves the potted plants from the fire escape to inside—no matter if they die without sun—and sets up watch in their place. Wears a red shirt that everyone's eye rises to, a red bird against the faded building. He meets my gaze. Fourteen, and she eleven. When she comes home, she won't say where she's gone, is no snitch. She pulls a baseball cap over her eyes, doodles her own name: Angel.

## Home, Again—

Our window faces an alley from which I can never see the moon. Love, I beg us to move. Finger the ring you put around me and cry, which isn't that strange—I cry almost every day. When you asked, we were on a mountain overlooking the hilly Palouse, pine trees rooted deep in Idaho's volcanic soil, you said you remembered when Mount St. Helen erupted, the ash everywhere, no, you didn't say that then, you said something kinder, something about us, and cried while asking, and later I cried, and then we ate pizza and picked out a ring. Picking out an apartment is harder. I want a two bedroom, for when a baby comes, but that's far off, or is it, it doesn't have to be, it can be close once we start trying, but we haven't started yet ... Yesterday, one of the tiny kids at work, not Angel, her mother pulled her out, one of the little ones, fell asleep sitting on my lap, one arm looped around my neck, her breath hot on my chest, sticky bangs plastered to her forehead. Leslie Jamison was there, reading from *The Empathy Exams—But I believe in intention and I believe in work. I believe in waking up in the middle of the night and packing our bags and leaving our worst selves for our better ones—* which is true, but I can't tell my worse self from my better one. Can you?

# Seattle

This morning, I dreamed of a café where the walls  
were steamed light blue from the heat of our breath,  
our food. A friend walked by, on the other side,  
and I banged on the glass to reach him, did he hear ...  
Choices branch and then reunite until dreams end,  
as they all do, in waking. I saw Seattle's hills, I was there  
for a wedding, in a hotel, another man was there,  
he said he'd buy me two rings if I took off this one,  
said he had pictures of me I don't remember  
him taking, they're already online. But I wasn't scared.  
The bridesmaids eavesdropped on conversations,  
butts planted on the soiled carpet that covered  
the spiral staircase. The other man and I opened doors,  
looking for an empty room, he wrapped his arms around my waist.  
My mother saw him but thought he was you.  
I was the only one who could tell you were different.

Here's what happened before the dream happened:  
I woke at 2 am and felt the rubber band around my chest tighten,  
I wandered the house with the mice, I made soup  
from corn cobs and black eyed peas. At sunrise I cracked  
the door and watched you sleep. When you opened  
your eyes I joined you in bed, and when you rose  
I placed my face where your body had been and felt  
the boundaries between our living dissolve.

## Keep Snowy Waves In Summer

After heavy rains, the tree roots crack the sidewalk open.  
It hinges like a door, ravines tracing the outlines of map  
I'm learning how to read. I thought of how a river  
deposits sediments, and those sediments change the river's course.  
Am I only thinking these things because it's so hard  
to find your way underground? Like something has to guide us  
in between subway tunnels and sewer lines and the water pipes  
and if I could only find that blueprint, spread it out over the roof  
and make my way along its hard-edged lines there would be an answer.  
Angel came back, for a moment, holding a birthday present  
in penitent palms. We asked her to stay, to help puzzle out  
a sentence from Latin into English: *In vere flue lenis, et serva nivales  
undas in aestate*. But it was no one's birthday, and then her mother  
ordered her back home. *College isn't for girls like her*, her mother  
told me when I called that evening, begging for Angel's return.  
I felt a door close in my heart. Then I felt it open again.  
The rains here water even dead languages. They find soil  
where it seems like there was none, and roots grow.

## Other Islands

Sarah's wedding was far from the farm, it was on the ocean,  
and I stood, my hands holding the flowers she grew, trying to see  
their faces as they promised love. Years before,  
we were in the park, high on mushrooms, when we heard the news  
that Osama bin Laden had died, his body thrown  
out of a helicopter into the ocean, no final resting place, no grave  
as a gift, and we felt, then, that the blanket we were sitting on  
was a very safe place in a world that expanded all the time,  
a world ballooning with violence, and we resolved to stay  
on our square as long as we could, watching the clouds turn  
from one creature into another. She was my next-door neighbor then,  
her front stoop overflowing with potted plants that climbed  
the fence between her place and mine. Inside, a spider plant  
hung under a skylight, spilling into air. When she left New York  
her love followed her, and they wed and divorced all in short time.  
I try not to think too much about what makes a love end.  
What I know is that we needed each other as bin Laden's limbs  
dropped from the sky, from helicopter into a deep blue sea.  
The eyes of the soldiers were flecked with gold, their bodies  
carapaced. I felt poisoned the next day. And he was still dead.